"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE THEOLOGY OF THE LAND

By W. S. Boycott

Man's use or abuse of the land, his agricultural interests, and his service and devotion to God in Christian worship are involved with each other. As there is an agricultural aspect of all Christian theology, so there is a theological aspect of agriculture; and while this paper chiefly concerns those who work on the land, it has implications for all, since food is a primary concern of everybody the world over. We are not being carnal in saying that man's first requirement is food, it is God's express intention that we should use the land to feed our bodies as it is that we should worship Him. How it may be asked, can hungry people worship or serve him or do his will?

Our starting point might well be scripture itself "hate not laborious work neither husbandry which the most high hath ordained" (Ecclus. vii,15) but let us first look at a modern document, the Lambeth Report of 1948 -

> "Our need for bread, our need for one another, and our need for God are all interdependent. Man is a creature not the Lord of Creation. He is therefore responsible before God for what he does to the world and how he uses it . . . Man is responsible to his creator for the use which he makes of the "raw material", in industrial and agricultural activity . .

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"Those who live by raising the crops the most obvious instances of man's co operation with the creator can still understand better than anyone else the religious conception of man's work in the world. Dependence on God and for the service of his Will. Thus the new concern of the church with agriculture may have far reaching social consequences".

These consequences may not only be social they could well also be truly religious, for by an understanding of God's creative work, in which man co-operates as in agriculture, we may well discover, or rediscover, an aspect of the wholeness of divine living which scripture sets forth and which the church, concentrating upon "spiritual matters", has often been ignored.

God as seen in the pages of the Old Testament, is the active living God (1.Sam.xvii, 26). He is the God of corn and wine as much as of his people (Hos.ii, 8). The good and fertile land was given by God to Israel - or as we might say to his church - as an inheritance. The people of the Old Testament lived close to the land so that good or bad harvests, the prosperity of their flocks and herds was of vital concern to them, it was foundation upon which their faith in God rested. At the same time we get echoes of a frame of mind which has lifted itself from the land. It is with apparent sarcasm that Job (xii, 7) suggests "ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee or speak to the earth and it shall teach thee...." however in his final answer to Job the Almighty appeals to all his works in creation and finally blesses Job by doubling the number of his flocks and herds (compare Job xiii,12 with i, 3). Also notice that he still has seven sons and three daughters as in the beginning. The interdependence of the land and faith comes out again and again. "The Lord will be jealous for the land and bless (or pity) his people" (Joel,ii,18). The land comes first as a necessary condition for blessing his people; this is a theological reality. Bad harvests and famine have direct and detrimental effects upon the worship of the temple (Joel, i,9). Man is dependent upon God both for food and divine guidance, which go together. "He fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Ps.lxxviii,72). Agricultural prosperity is an essential part of the <u>wholeness</u> of divine living in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word <u>adamah</u>* (usually translated earth, ground or land) is the agricultural reality, and once is bluntly translated as husbandry (II Chron. xxvi, 10). For Uzziah, like Caleb and Amos and many other Old Testament characters, are farmers as well as servants of the Lord. One of their deepest convictions about God was, that he daily renews, or changes the face of the earth, <u>adamah</u> (cp.ps.civ,30) and was the Lord of all cattle and corn as much as his chosen people.

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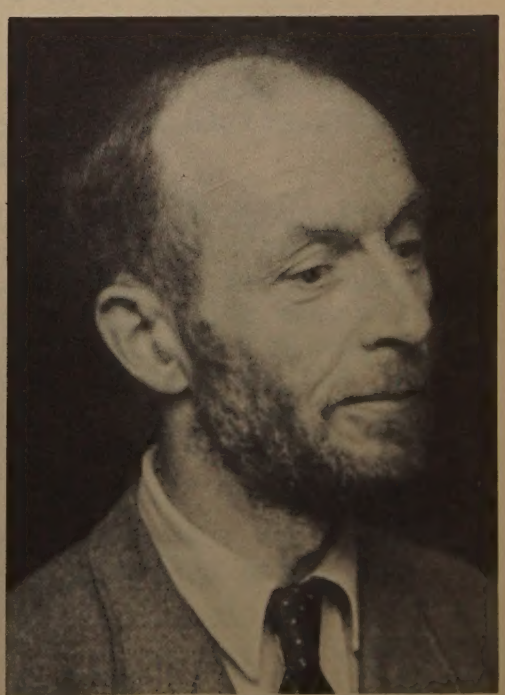
* Not to be confused with <u>erets</u>, a more common and more general word for earth, land, country, etc.

The New Testament all the way through presupposes the Old. St. Paul (a true Hebrew but by no means a countryman! sees that the one permanent and final vindication of God is that he provides our food (Acts.xiv,17). Our Lord himself was a Rustic; as the son of the village carpenter he probably had a close technical knowledge of, not merely the use of, but the making of wooden ploughs. His teaching and parables are rooted in nature and creation. It is his understanding of nature which gives so much of its teaching its real point. "The divineness of natural things is the major premise of all these parables" (see Dodd, Parables of the Kingdom, pp. 22-23). In saying that the salt which had lost its savour was not fit for the dunghill our Lord was showing such a respect for the dunghill as has possibly not been recorded of any other teacher (Luke xiv - 34-5). Some of the teaching concerning himself, e.g. the corn of wheat which must die to live again (John xii, 24) is again based on his understanding of nature and leads to the deeper, and mysterious doctrine of his own person. He it is in whom all things consist (Col.i,17). His understanding of humanity and its needs are bound up with, not only a direct knowledge of the Father's will, and love, but with a convication about man's place in the world as a farmer as well. His concern for our material and physical needs, for food, - "He had compassion upon them" - is evident of nearly every page of the gospels. The great Bread of Life chapter of St.John (vi) is built up on the physical hunger of the multitude. The Eucharist, whatever else there is to say about it, begins from the land. When Mary, early on the resurrection, mistook our Lord for the gardener, the Master Husbandman. When he taught, as in the Old Testament (St.Mat. iv, 4 cp. Deut.viii, 3), that man does not live by bread alone, he said nothing to underestimate the importance of bread. He saw its necessity was divine, that is divinely intended. And by the word 'bread' too he did not see just a crested form, but the whole living process of the soil and the toil and skill of man.



The church, if it is truly faithful to our Lord, has a direct duty towards the land as well as to mankind. For very good reason many of the laws of the Old Testament (e.g.Ex.xxiii,10-11; Lev.xxv,1-24) are directed towards good husbandry. The care and maintenance of the fertility of the earth is a divine necessity. While the church today has a good deal to say about marriage and divorce, it ought also to be concerned with the marriage relationship of husbandry. To suppose that matrimony can be holy but not agriculture is to expose ignorance of nature with man and otherwise. There is, in fact, a real connection between the two meanings of the word 'husband' as lord

what husbandry means perhaps can understand fully what Paul is tryin to say. Again in Jeremiah there is an even clearer connection between the literal and allegorical use of natural things. The prophe is sent down by the Lord to watch a potter at work at his wheels, before he is permitted to utter the well known prophesy of our being clay in the hands of the great potter, God himself (Jer. xviii).

The real wealth or poverty of mankind depends on the resources of the earth. Many questions which at first sight appear to be purely political or social are in essence bound up with the natur world. Today food shortages, or the threat of food shortages, in many parts of the world control political questions. No one can den that if the world's food supply was either considerably more or even considerably less that it is our political or social questions would be entirely different. One way which the church might well tackle some of our social and human problems may well be by concerning itself, not with mankind alone, but the land upon which mankind lives. Just as swords or plough shares was a dilemma of Old Testament times so "Guns or butter" is the same dilemma in modern words. Thus although a theology of agriculture may appear as a dull and to some extent an abstract idea, fully understood it is as capable as the gospel itself of turning the world upside down.

over his household and his family as well as his land. The ideals of Christian family life extend, where land is cultivated, to the fields as much as the home itself. Though many of us have a clear idea of what is meant by "good husbandry", it is notoriously difficult to express in simple language. It is, perhaps "to love, cherish and obey" the land; obediance being the most important. This definition when put forward in all seriousness by one of the largest farmers on the Cotswold hills reduced his audience to loud laughter. Yet he was being perfectly serious and it is possibly the best definition of good husbandry that has ever been put forward. The church as such, is not concerned with the technicalities of farming, but the principles of preserving land fertility and of preventing land exploitation are clear; and the church has a positive duty to uphold these principles.

As well as proclaiming husbandry as holy, the church has the duty to bring all those engaged in agriculture into closer knowledge of the whole gospel. Those living on the land and who have any inclination for God, have a basis for their faith which is often denied to their urban brothers. Although to some this may appear to be paganism, it is a survival of the conditions which brought people to the Lord in the Bible. Yet when, for example, the church is engaged in bringing dairy maids to make their communion, it must attempt to make this directly relevant to their entire work. It has been said - in England at any rate - that the hope of the church lies in the numerous but often small rural congregations where there is reason to believe that, although they may not show it, country people still feel after God and find him at a deeper and more intense level. It is the ministry of the church who often need to be brought to see the theological significance of the land and agriculture more than the people who work upon it. All too frequently the church has appeared to suggest that man can live without bread, or at any rate that the land is irrelevant to the gospel, however if we are to recover a theological appreciation of man's use of the land it is often the ministry rather than the people who need educating in this direction.

That the Church should concern itself with good husbandry may seem to some an innovation, but this is not so. Defective as the Church of the middle ages may have been in some respects, it is aware of its duty towards the land. In England the closing of the monasties in the sixteenth centry was a severe blow to agriculture. The whole idea of good husbandry is derived from ecclesiastical care of the land. To quote a particular case, the rent rolls of the Malmesbury Abbey for the years 1318-19 contain this injunction and direction to their land overseer to make sure that -

> "The fields are properly treated with marle and manure as far as local practice requires and if those who look after the fields are treating them as required".

The phrase "as far as local practice requires" is significant. Different pieces of land require to be treated in different ways just as

personalities differ. Then as now our "love" for the land entails not merely general principles but their application to particular and differing cases. Robert Grosteste, the famous Bishop of Lincoln in the 13th century, wrote his rules (of Estate and Farm Management) as part of his theological works. The effect of the medieval church on husbandry can, to some extent, be seen today in the comparison of modern agriculture in the Christian and the non Christian parts of the world e.g. Asia and Africa. Just as schools and hospitals which were once the sole concern of the Church have now become completely secular, so good farming has become severed from its original context.

The Church - in rural areas at any rate - ought to return this direct connection between the land and the gospel, and do so with two objects, which are really one, in mind. The first is the preservation and maintenance of the fertility of the soil and the area of good husbandry, it is an art rather than a science. In the second place the church should use this as a means of deepening the faith of the people.

Too often the church's faith is placed in abstraction from daily life, and it is the church which maintains the false barrier between the sacred and the secular. In rural areas there is a wonderful opportunity to relate our faith in the gospel to our daily work on the land. Our redemption wrought in Jesus Christ is not, as has often been supposed, directly antithical to the doctrine of creation. Redemption is a "restoration of wholeness" and, in the modern situation, the church can well be the redeeming community of God by reaffirming man's true relation to, and use of, the soil and its natural products. As Mr. H. J. Massingham declared "A Christianity divorced from nature is not itself, and a nature without God only an abstraction". It is extremely difficult if not quite impossible sometimes, for the church in our big cities to realize the divine significance of nature, or in particular the land, but the rural church can do this, must do it for the whole church.

Lomonosov, the Russian poet and philosopher proclaimed that the Creator had given mankind two books. In the one He had manifested His majesty, in the other His will. The first book is the visible world He has created, the second book holy scripture. If one may continue Lomonosov's metaphor, these are not two separate works but volume one and two of the same work and the task of the church today is to make clear the connection and continuation between them.

Scripture sometimes uses the natural world in an allegorical sense. In many cases we have carefully to distinguish purely allegorical use from literal use, the former in scripture has a particular significance. Let us look closely at one example "For we are labourers together with God: Ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building" (Cor.iii,9). While it is quite obvious that St. Paul is speaking allegorically, he assumes an understanding of husbandry that makes his point all the more clear. Only those who really understand